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ABSTRACT

This brief paper summarizes the current literature concerning youth aggression and violence especially risk, resilience, and prevention. It summarizes risk factors for aggression and violence including child characteristics (e.g., hyperactivity, risk-taking, emotional disturbance), home conditions (e.g., harsh and ineffective parental discipline, child abuse and/or neglect), and school community influences (e.g., low school involvement and academic and social failure). It notes that many students exposed to risk factors do not display aggressive or violent behaviors and identifies some protective factors explaining this resilience such as positive personal attitudes, a close attachment to at least one family member, and a supportive school and community environment. Evidence supporting integrative, proactive approaches to preventing youth aggression and violence is offered, especially the teaching of academic and social skills necessary for success in school and life. (Contains 10 references.) (DB)

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Youth Aggression and Violence: Risk, Resilience, and Prevention

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Contrary to what might be concluded from media reports, statistics show that youth aggression and violence is decreasing, particularly in schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Although multiple victim homicides in schools have increased, schools are the safest places for children to be (Leone, Meyer, Malgren, & Misel, 2000). In fact, rates of aggressive and violent behaviors are about the same for students with disabilities and those without (e.g., Cooley, 1995). The issue of youth aggression and violence has been pushed to the forefront with the recognition that prevention is the most effective strategy for reducing youth aggression and violence.

Risk Factors for Aggression and Violence

No single factor can predict who is likely to engage in aggressive and violent behavior, but longitudinal studies have established developmental pathways that lead to antisocial and delinquent behavior, which includes patterns of aggression and violence.

Hyperactivity, limited attention span, restlessness, risk-taking, poor social skills and certain beliefs and attitudes (e.g., the necessity of retaliation), appear to favor the development of delinquent behavior. In addition, students with certain disabilities (e.g., emotional disturbance, attention deficit-hyperactivity disorders, specific learning disabilities) are more likely to display antisocial behavior, suggesting that these conditions may be risk factors for later aggressive and violent actions (Leone et al., 2000).

Conditions in the home--harsh and ineffective parental discipline, lack of parental involvement, family conflict, parental criminality, child abuse and/or neglect, and rejection--also predict early onset and chronic patterns of antisocial behavior (McEvoy & Welker, 2000). When these conditions are present, children may be "literally trained to be aggressive during episodes of conflict with family members" (Forgatch & Patterson, 1998, p.86).

Influences in the school and community also help establish enduring patterns of aggressive and violent behavior. School factors include low school involvement, academic and social failure, lack of clarity and follow-through in rules and policies, poor and/or inconsistent administrative support, and few allowances for individual differences. In addition, disciplinary practices in many schools are inconsistent and inequitable (Skiba & Peterson, 2000). In spite of IDEA requirements, a disproportionate number of students with disabilities and students from diverse backgrounds are subjected to such punitive consequences as suspension.

Some communities lack features that help to prevent antisocial lifestyles, such as before- and after-school programs, recreational opportunities, and adult mentors. In addition, the absence of emotional or financial support (e.g., friends, employment) may lead to efforts to gain such support through antisocial behavior.

Despite evidence that it is environmental characteristics interacting with intra-personal characteristics, rather than internal characteristics of children alone, that shape patterns of aggressive behavior, some people advocate "profiling," the practice of identifying potentially violent children through their psychological characteristics. A recent Federal Bureau of Investigation report cautioned, "trying to draw up a catalogue or 'checklist' of warning signs to detect a potential school shooter can be shortsighted, even dangerous. Such lists, publicized by the media, can end up unfairly labeling many nonviolent students as potentially dangerous or even lethal" (O'Toole, 2000, p.2). A more effective approach is to identify factors that contribute to resiliency in the presence of risk factors, and use these in creating strategies for prevention.

Resiliency

Many youth who are exposed to risk factors do not display aggressive and violent behaviors. Certain protective factors appear to account for this phenomenon. Often, these factors are described in terms of *resiliency*--the ability to recover strength and spirit under adversity on both internal (self) and external (family, school, community) factors for a positive outcome. Like risk factors, protective factors may be strengthened through interaction with other factors. Individual protective factors include having a more positive view of one's life circumstances and ability to affect those around them, as well as stress-reducing strategies. Family protective factors include having an attachment to at least one family member who engages in proactive, healthy behaviors with the youth (e.g., high expectations for academic and social performance in and out of school, shared values and morals). This individual provides the youth with a sense of belonging and purpose for attachment to the family as well as sending the message that the youth is valued for his/her abilities.

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In the schools, both teachers and administrators can play an integral part in the development of resiliency in youth exposed to multiple risks. Schools help students develop resiliency by providing positive and safe learning environments, setting high, yet achievable, academic and social expectations, and facilitating their academic and social success. Also, youth who belong to a socially appropriate group sponsored and supported by the school (e.g., academic club or social organization) are less likely to demonstrate aggression and/or violence (Catalano, Loeber, & McKinney, 1999).

The community, representing a network of social structures and organizations, can be an important deterrent to engaging in antisocial and violent behavior. Like an influential family member, a community mentor can be instrumental in teaching a child strategies for avoiding trouble and interacting positively with others (Van Acker & Wehby, 2000) and can link the school and family for supporting and encouraging the strengths and abilities of the youth. Other community support factors include after school employment, recreational opportunities, and volunteer activities.

Prevention

Traditionally, schools and communities have responded to aggressive and violent behaviors with reactive strategies that are punitive (e.g., corporal punishment, suspension, expulsion, incarceration). These approaches have not had good results. Widespread advocacy for such social politics as zero tolerance and "adult time for adult crime" actually may exacerbate youth aggression and violence and influence popular opinions that such policies are effective when, in fact, they are not (Leone et al., 2000). The lack of accountability and inattention to research and results has led policy makers to advocate practices that are fashionable. Juvenile boot camps continue to operate in several states although studies have shown that their graduates' recidivism rates are as high or higher than other correctional programs. In addition, transferring youth to adult jails to protect the public may sound tough and righteous, yet studies have shown that youth who spend time in adult jails are more likely to be re-arrested for increasingly serious crimes compared to youth in juvenile facilities (Mendel, 2000). In contrast, evidence is accumulating that more integrative, proactive approaches are effective in preventing youth aggression and violence.

Skiba and Peterson (2000) suggest a number of themes that should be included in a school's plan for preventing and responding to youth aggression and violence:

- Conflict resolution/social instruction
- Classroom strategies for preventing and responding to disruptive behavior
- Parent involvement
- Screening to identify students who are at-risk for school failure
- School- and district-wide data systems
- Crisis and security planning
- Schoolwide discipline and behavioral planning
- Functional assessment and individualized behavior plans.

A common thread runs through effective prevention models: instead of waiting for undesired behaviors to occur and then reacting with harsh punishment, educators should proactively teach the academic and social skills necessary for success in school and life. Some of the characteristics of proactive, instructional models for preventing youth aggression and violence are

- Including all youth in school and community programs,
- Providing a full continuum of educational opportunities,
- Reinforcing appropriate behaviors across environments, people, and contexts,
- Promoting academic and social success, and
- Establishing partnerships that include shared responsibilities.

Through these activities and through teaching, modeling, guiding, and reinforcing appropriate skills, schools can provide a context for youth to learn and use appropriate behaviors instead of aggressive and violent ones.

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